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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENT BEGINS DEBATING CONFIDENCE MOTION,
RESULT STILL TOO CLOSE TO CALL

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. The first day of the two-day special session of parliament opened on July 21 and will culminate in the confidence vote late on July 22 that will determine the future of the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) coalition government and its ability to advance the U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative. The commencement of the special session followed a tumultuous July 19-20 weekend during which the government experienced at least a dozen discrete gains and losses, as undecided parties declared positions, ambivalent parties issued whips to prevent fragmentation, and individual members were picked off by rival camps. On July 21, media outlets reported differing totals for each camp. No clear consensus has emerged. As of July 21, Post's best estimates are 262 votes in favor of the UPA government and the nuclear initiative, 265 against, and 2 confirmed abstentions, with 13 remaining undecided. (No more than 271 votes will be required for a majority, likely less due to absences and abstentions.) Also as of July 21, thirteen MPs remained undecided. Post believes eleven are leaning toward supporting the UPA government -- either by direct vote or by abstaining -- while two are leaning against.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY CONTINUED. Talk around town over the July 19-20 weekend focused on Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader Mayawati's efforts to project herself as the anti-government icon, leading to speculation that should the UPA government fall, Mayawati's closed-door dealings could win her the right to claim the Prime Minister's office in some sort of third front government without holding early elections. Local media searched out every source available to discern trends in the shifting alliances, sparking an unfounded rumor that the Prime Minister would resign. One Congress Party spokesman claimed that as many as 15 BJP representatives would abstain out of fear that Mayawati would somehow cobble together enough support to become Prime Minister should the UPA fall. Another well-placed source in Congress said that the chances are nil that a caretaker government would proceed with the deal. In parliament, Prime Minister Singh took the high ground by defending the record of his four-plus year government, opposition leader Advani assailed the Prime Minister for failure on all counts, and Foreign Minister Mukherjee defended the nuclear initiative. Other speakers from the Left, Samajwadi Party, and Mayawati's BSP crowed familiar lines, followed by representatives of more obscure parties who raised a litany of issues, some unrelated to the confidence motion. END SUMMARY.

Lots of Changes, But Little Clear Direction
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13. (SBU) Furious political bargaining ensued over the July 19-20 weekend with several small parties declaring their positions ahead of the start of the special session of parliament on July 21 followed by the confidence vote on July 22. No clear consensus has emerged. As of July 21, Post's best estimates are 262 votes in favor of the UPA government and the nuclear initiative, 265 against, and 2 confirmed abstentions, with 13 undecided. (With 543 occupied Lok Sabha seats and two confirmed abstentions, no more than 271 votes will be required for a majority, likely to be further reduced by absences and abstentions; in the event of a tie, Speaker Chatterjee would presumably vote with the opposition.) These estimates represent a net gain of three votes for the UPA and 10 votes for the opposition since July 18. The large gain for the opposition came from the previously undecided Shiv Sena, which officially declared for the opposition. However, media speculated that at least one, if not more, of the Shiv Sena's twelve MPs may abstain. Smaller gains and losses of a few MPs emerged throughout the weekend as undecided parties declared positions, ambivalent parties issued whips to prevent fragmentation, and individual members were picked off by rival camps. On July 21, media outlets reported differing totals for each camp with no clear winner. (The highly dynamic political landscape is illustrated by at least a dozen discrete shifts over the last two days, described in detail in paragraph 13.)

14. (SBU) As of July 21, thirteen MPs remained undecided. Post believes eleven are leaning towards support for the UPA while two are leaning against. The support from those favoring the government could take the form of either a vote

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for the UPA or an abstention. (Paragraph 14 includes a detailed break-out of undecided MPs.)

Politically Charged Atmosphere in Delhi
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15. (U) High political drama seized Delhi over the July 19-20 weekend as MPs of all stripes exercised their leverage to gain as much power as possible. Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) leader Mayawati held meetings with several undeclared parties and emerged as a strong voice against the UPA government. Her standing as a leader of opposition nearly eclipsed that of the UPA's two main enemies, L.K Advani's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Left parties, led by communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) general secretary Prakash Karat. There was even speculation that should the UPA government fall, Mayawati's closed-door dealings could win her a claim on the Prime Minister's office in some sort of third front government without holding early elections.

16. (U) Local media searched out every source available to discern trends in the shifting alliances. The thinly sourced reporting included numerous false claims of support or lack thereof for both sides. On July 19, an unfounded rumor circulated that the Prime Minister would resign. The press was -- and continues to be -- awash with bold statements from opposing camps that the UPA would sail through the trust vote or go down like a sinking ship. To bolster their numbers, the BJP even flew back a former film star-turned-MP from knee surgery in the U.S. in order to vote against the government. The media reported several stories of MPs who will be brought from hospitals, against their doctors' advice, to cast their votes. With neither side with a clear majority, post expects media speculation to run rampant until the votes are counted.

17. (U) On July 20, Prime Minister Singh and opposition leader Advani held dueling dinners for their supporters. Media counted eight absent BJP MPs, one of whom attended the UPA dinner. Four others were reportedly in ill health, but the absence of three others has fueled speculation that significant numbers of BJP members may abstain on July 22. A

senior Congress Party official claimed to PolCouns on July 21 that as many as 15 BJP representatives would abstain out of fear that Mayawati would somehow cobble together enough support to become Prime Minister should the UPA fall. Another well-placed Congress leader told PolCouns on July 21 that "the chances are nil" that a caretaker government would proceed with the nuclear initiative if the UPA government loses the confidence vote.

Inside Parliament: A Taste of the Speeches

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18. (SBU) The scheduled 16-hour special session of parliament opened at 11:00 and dominated local media coverage. Prime Minister Singh took the high ground by defending the record of his four-plus year government, opposition leader Advani assailed the Prime Minister for failure on all counts, and Foreign Minister Mukherjee defended the nuclear initiative. Other speakers from the Left, Samajwadi Party, and Mayawati's BSP crowed familiar lines, followed by representatives of more obscure parties who raised a litany of issues, some unrelated to the confidence motion. During breaks in the session, media focused on Speaker Chatterjee's "defiance" of his party by remaining in the chair, footage of the Shiv Sena MPs sitting together in a group, and JMM leader Shibu Soren sleeping during the debate.

19. (U) Prime Minister Manmohan Singh opened the debate by moving a one-line confidence motion: "That this House expresses its confidence in the Council of Ministers." He praised left leaders Jyoti Basu and Harkishan Singh Surjeet, along with current UPA leaders and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Karunanidhi as being the architects of the UPA government, which has so far governed for four years and 2 months. He avoided mentioning current CPM leaders like Prakash Karat and Sitaram Yechury. The Prime Minister listed some of the achievements of his government and commented about rising inflation, but only glancingly touched on the nuclear initiative.

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110. (U) In an hour-long speech, opposition BJP leader L.K. Advani charged the government with failure on all counts and for presiding over four years of "misrule." He covered a range of issues including internal security and inflation. Advani emphasized that it was the government that had called for the confidence vote after losing the support of its own partners over the nuclear initiative. Advani said he was neither against nuclear energy nor against a "strategic relationship" with the U.S. (or Japan or Russia), but said, "We would not like India to be a party to an agreement which is unequal," adding that the India-U.S. nuclear deal makes India a "subservient partner." Advani made it clear that his party would "renegotiate" the nuclear deal and seek a constitutional amendment so that no international agreement could be carried out by any government without the concurrence of parliament. Advani said it was neither the opposition BJP nor the Left parties that were responsible for the present crisis, but the UPA itself. Advani also took a swipe at the Prime Minister, saying, "Without the Congress president's (Sonia Gandhi) approval, you will not take a single step." Advani's charge that Manmohan Singh had not supported the BJP government under Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee when it executed the Pokharan nuclear tests in 1998 drew a sharp response from Prime Minister Singh, who disputed the comment and asked that it be "substantiated" as well as a rebuke from Speaker Chatterjee, who said that Advani "should know better" than to reveal specifics of a 1998 Raya Sabha debate. Advani was interrupted by MPs from the Congress Party and others several times despite attempts by Speaker Chatterjee to restore order. Advani blamed the UPA government for side-tracking important issues like terrorism. He pointed out to serial blasts in Mumbai, Malegaon, Hyderabad and Jaipur and terror attacks in Jammu and Varansi in recent months.

¶11. (U) Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee defended the government and the need for the deal, calling the Prime Minister "visionary." He said that it was the need of the hour for India to seek alternative energy and that mining of uranium in the northeast could not be carried out for various reasons. He said that the nuclear deal would be a "visa to the nuclear club," reminding the parliament that the nuclear initiative would not only facilitate nuclear commerce with the U.S. but also with other members of the international community. Mukherjee expressed disbelief that parliament was willing to bring down a government that "brought about 9 percent growth."

¶12. (U) Mohammad Salim of the CPI-M took the floor next and charged the government with deviating from the Common Minimum Program. He said that the government was very keen on the deal but little bothered about burning issues such as inflation. He said that the Left could never support a government that was giving up national sovereignty by becoming a junior partner of the U.S. Ram Gopal Verma of the Samajwadi Party (SP) said that the deal was in India's interest. He called upon the members to rise above petty political considerations and vote in India's national interest. He finally made an appeal to members to vote at least for their self interest to save their seats until the term of this House runs out. BSP representative Brajesh Pathak charged the UPA government with mortgaging the country to the U.S.

Further Detail: A Dozen Shifting Positions

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¶13. (SBU) The highly dynamic political landscape is illustrated by at least a dozen discrete shifts over the last two days, as follows:

-- Lok Sabha Speaker and CPI-M member Somnath Chatterjee has refused calls from within his party to resign, saying his position in the Lok Sabha is "above politics." Chatterjee will vote last, most likely abstaining, but would presumably cast the decisive vote against the UPA in solidarity with his party in the event of a tie.

-- Samajwadi Party member S.P. Singh Bhaghel formally declared his intent to vote against the UPA government calling the nuclear deal "anti-Muslim." Atteq Ahmad, one of

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the jailed Samajwadi Party members, stated that he is undecided. Both he and Afzal Ansari, the other jailed SP member, are weighing their options. Should they desert the SP their likely home is Mayawati's BSP.

-- Rebel Dravida Munnetra Kashagam (DMK) MP Thiru Maran, who had previously said he would abstain, announced he will vote for the UPA. The DMK is a UPA supporter, but Maran had strayed from the party because of a falling-out with DMK leader and Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi for reasons based in local Tamil Nadu politics.

-- Of the three Janata Dal-Secular (JD-S) MPs, one had already declared against the government. On July 20, JD-S leader Deve Gowda emerged from a meeting with BSP chief Mayawati and stated that the remaining two MPs would likewise vote against the UPA. Both leaders appeared to be pre-positioning for the next national elections.

-- After meeting with the Prime Minister over the weekend, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) leader Shibu Soren officially declared that his party's five MPs will vote for the UPA government. Soren's support was finally sealed with a Cabinet berth for himself along with other inducements.

-- In a turnabout, Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) chief Ajit Singh declared that his party's three MPs would vote against the

UPA government. After meeting with Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister and BSP leader Mayawati, the UP-based Singh reversed his stance in what appears to be political positioning for the coming national elections.

-- BJP member Bhushan Sharan from Uttar Pradesh stated his intention to defect from the party in favor of the Samajwadi Party due to local considerations and vote for the government. A suspended BJP member from Gujarat, Somabhai Patel, has reportedly switched allegiances and will vote for the UPA government, but Post believes his decision will not be made until the last minute.

-- One of eight Janata Dal-United (JDU) MPs, Ramswaroop Prasad, confirmed his support for the UPA while another, Pookunhi Koya, is wavering. Both MPs stand to lose their seats because of redistricting which made them soft targets for the UPA government.

-- The Shiv Sena, which supports the nuclear initiative but works closely with the BJP in Maharashtra, announced its intention to vote against the UPA government, however not all of its members attended the solidarity dinner hosted by BJP leader L.K. Advani. Media speculated that at least one, and possibly more, Shiv Sena members may yet abstain.

-- Cracks appeared over the weekend in the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS), with dissident MP A. Narendra telling the press he is considering voting for the UPA. Previously, all three TRS members had stated opposition to the government unless they moved forward with Telangana statehood, which is a non-starter for the UPA government.

-- As with most of the independents and one-MP parties, the Mizo National Front (MNF) will hold its decision until the last minute. Post had thought the MNF would vote against the UPA, but he remains undecided.

-- Mamata Bannerjee, the sole representative of the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), announced her intention to abstain on July 21. Bannerjee is a BJP supporter and served as a minister in the previous NDA government. However, she loathes the Left and her abstention was the most expedient middle ground.

The Fence-Sitters: 13 Key Votes

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¶14. (SBU) The following is a detailed breakout of the 13 undecided MPs:

-- Two Samajwadi Party members remain on the fence, Afzal Ansari and Ateeq Ahmad, both from Uttar Pradesh and both in jail. They will hold out until for the best possible deal. If they defect, it will be to Mayawati's BSP.

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-- Embassy contacts report that the Jammu and Kashmir National Conference's (J&KNC) two MPs will either vote for the UPA or abstain, but are unlikely to vote against the government. Party officials told Embassy staff their hopes of forming a government following state elections in October depend upon a coalition with the Congress Party.

-- Suspended BJP MP Somabhai Patel has been wavering in his support for the BJP for local political reason in Gujarat and could be picked off by the UPA.

-- Pookunhi Koya, JDU member from Lakshadweep is also wavering for local political reasons and could bolt. Some media have already placed him in the UPA camp with the other JDU rebel, Ramswaroop Prasad, but Post believes he remains undecided.

-- Jailed BSP member Umakant Yadav remains undecided, but

contacts report he is leaning toward supporting the UPA, partly because his own party boss, Mayawati, arranged for his arrest when she summoned him to her house.

-- A senior Congress Party floor manager told PolCouns on July 21 that five Independents MPs remain undecided, with four leaning toward supporting the UPA government and one against. The potential supporters include Wangyuh Konyak from Nagaland, Thupstan Chhewang from Jammu and Kashmir, who is negotiating for Union Territory Status for Ladakh and Sansuma Bwiswmuthiary from Assam, who is holding out for assurances of development projects for his constituency, and Mani Charenamei from Manipur, who supports an increase in the size of the state of Nagaland. Vanlalzawma from Mizoram is leaning toward opposing the government.

-- Dissident TRS MP A. Narendra told the press on July 20 he is considering voting for the UPA. Previously, he had been against the government, but Consulate Chennai reports Narendra, though undecided, may be leaning toward support for the UPA.

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